

Bighorn Sheep

Description:

The bighorn sheep is best known for the head-to-head combat between males, which has been observed to last up to 24 hours. They may reach one another at speeds of 50-70 miles per hour, with an estimated force of 2400 pounds!

I Think I Know What a Sheep Looks Like! Are you sure? Bighorn sheep don't look exactly the same as a domestic sheep. Bighorn sheep are compact, muscular-bodied animals covered with an outer coat of brittle guard hairs and under fur that is short, gray, crimped fleece. The summer coat is a rich, glossy brown, but it becomes quite faded by late winter. The belly, rump, back of legs, eye patches, and narrow, pointed muzzle are white.

The most distinct feature of the mature male bighorn sheep is a set of massive brown horns which spiral backwards from the top of the head. The female's horns are more slender and less curved. Horn size is a symbol of rank. The bigger the horns, the higher the rank. By the time a ram reaches 7 or 8 years of age, his set of horns may be a full curl, up to 33 inches wide and as much as 30 pounds. That is quite a bit of extra weight to carry around! The female's shorter, narrower horns never exceed half a curl.

Not Afraid of Heights!

To allow for quick escape from predators, bighorn sheep inhabit alpine meadows, grassy mountain slopes and foothill country near rugged, rocky cliffs and bluffs. In winter, bighorn prefer elevations of 2,500-5,000 feet where annual snowfall is less than 60 inches a year; because unlike other hoofed mammals, they are not able to paw through deep snow to feed. WHY Their summer range is between 6,000-8,500 feet in elevation. The mountain goat and the bighorn sheep share similar habitat. In Idaho, Rocky Mountain bighorns are found in the central mountains, and California bighorns are found in southwestern desert canyons.

Tracks Like a Deer

The tracks of the bighorn sheep resemble those of the deer, although the bighorn's has a straighter edge and is less pointed with a blockier shape. The bighorn's fore prints are slightly larger than handprints. Regardless of these differences, the tracks of the deer and bighorn sheep are easily confused.

Browsers and Grazers

Bighorn sheep like to graze. Bighorns consume grasses, sedges, and forbs when these are abundant. But when preferred food is scarce, especially in winter, bighorns will sometimes browse woody plants like willow and sage. In desert areas, bighorn sheep often eat brushy plants like holly and cactus. They generally eat throughout the day, then lay down to chew their cud. Bighorns use their complex 9-stage digestive process to maximize removal of nutrients from food of marginal quality.

Quick Getaways

Bighorn sheep find safety in numbers. When predators (like wolves, coyotes and mountain lions) threaten a group, they come together in a circle and face out towards the predator. Although not as well built for climbing as the mountain goat, bighorn sheep zigzag up and down cliff faces with amazing ease. Its hooves are sharp-edged, elastic, and soft on the inside, which helps give traction when bouncing from ledge to ledge over spans as wide as 20 feet. They can scramble up mountain slopes at 15 mph and even move over level ground at 30 miles per hour. Bighorns have extremely acute eyesight, which aids in jumping and gaining narrow mountain footholds, sometimes only 2 inches wide. From their high perches, bighorn sheep can detect and watch other animals moving at distances of up to a mile away.

Let the Battle Begin!

During the mating season (autumn and early winter), bighorn rams will snort loudly. Age as well as horn size determines male dominance status. Males do not defend territories but instead engage in gruesome battles over a particular female. Once the battle is over and the mating season complete, one or two lambs are born in the spring near steep cliffs. Within a few weeks of birth, lambs form bands of their own, seeking out their mothers only to suckle occasionally. They are completely weaned by 4-6 months of age. Female bighorn sheep usually do not breed until their second or third year. Because of fierce competition, males do not usually mate until they are 7 years old.

Migration

Bighorn sheep usually migrate seasonally, using larger upland areas in the summer and concentrating in sheltered valleys during the winter for protection. They sometimes form herds of over 100 individuals, but small groups of 8-10 are more common. Mature males form separate bachelor herds and usually stay apart from females and young for most of the year.

Range/Distribution

Bighorn sheep can be found in the Rocky Mountains from southern Canada to Colorado, parts of Nevada, western Texas, eastern California and northern Mexico. In Idaho, there are only 1600 Rocky Mountain bighorns, and 1100 California bighorns. In the desert, human activities are responsible for the bighorn's decline. Off-road vehicles, poaching in the 1960s and early '70s, drought, trespassing cattle, disease and mountain lion predation have worked together to push the population of desert bighorn sheep to the edge of extinction.



Bighorn Sheep
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Footprint

No Map

Distribution Map

1. **Species:** Bighorn Sheep
2. **Scientific Name:** *Ovis canadensis*
3. **Population:**
4. **Size:** Weight: Male (Ram) - 125 to 300 lbs.
Weight: Female (Ewe) - 75 to 200 lbs.
Length (with tail): 50-62 inches.
Height (at shoulder): 32-40 inches.
5. **Diet:** Mainly grasses, sedges and forbs.
6. **Young:** 1 or 2 per year; called lambs.
7. **Lifespan:** 7-12 years.
8. **Taxonomy:** Kingdom: Animalia
Phylum: Chordata
Class: Mammalia
Order: Artiodactyla
Family: Bovidae
9. **Hunted in Idaho:** Yes
10. **Hunting Link:**